"Avengers: Infinity War" Is A Cosmic Battle of Individualism vs. Collectivism

WARNING: this post contains spoilers.

> *"Whoever destroys a soul [of Israel], it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life of Israel, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." – The Talmud*

One of the oldest wars in history is the conflict between the ideas of collectivism and individualism. Collectivists have always been willing to sacrifice other people for the sake of group well-being, and there have always been individualists willing to stop them.

This battle has found its newest dramatization in the epic new Marvel movie *Avengers: Infinity War,* which brings our ass-kicking Marvel superheroes together for a showdown with the villain Thanos. Thanos is out to acquire the Infinity Stones, elemental stones which will give him control over existence itself – and which will enable him to carry out his mission of "restoring balance" to the universe by killing off half of its population.

Throughout this film, we see that a defining characteristic of our Avenger heroes is a stubborn belief in the supreme value of individuals and a stubborn refusal to sacrifice human life, even when collective human survival seems to be at stake.

Loki gives the Tesseract/Space Stone to Thanos in order to save Thor. For much of the movie, Red Witch fiercely resists the idea of hurting Vision, even though the practical course is to destroy the Mind Stone embedded in his forehead. Starlord can hardly bring himself to kill Gamora, even though letting her live risks the revelation of the Soul Stone to Thanos. Gamora chooses to reveal the Soul Stone to Thanos to save Nebula's life. Dr. Strange gives up the Time Stone to Thanos to save Tony Stark (who he doesn't even like).

On the other hand, to Thanos, individuals are utterly expendable. He has a utopian vision of a "balanced" world, and he has no problem committing genocide to make that possible.

Thanos' collectivism expresses itself in a backwards view of the world which many viewers may not immediately catch on to. Despite the film's scenes on the devastated and once-populated Titan (which attempt to make Thanos' mission seem sympathetic and reasonable) there are literally zero cases where eliminating half of a population by genocide improves productivity and wellbeing for the other half. And so far, there have

been zero cases of rising world population leading to worldwide death and destruction.

The world's population has increased by more than 2 billion since 1983. If Thanos was right, you would expect that we on planet Earth would be in dire straits.

On the contrary, by the World Bank's measure there was a decline of 74.1% in extreme poverty from 1987 to 2013. Even if you don't take the World Bank's figures for granted, extreme poverty seems to be falling by other measures, too.

Why is poverty falling? There's no simple answer to that, but there's not much reason to think that additional humans are making things worse. And even a basic understanding of division of labor should make us realize that humans tend to become more productive and wealthier as they join larger and more complex networks of people. Given peace and freedom, that's usually what happens.

Thano's backward (and unproven) view of the world stands in contrast to human reality, and it also contrasts with the reality of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Tony Stark is an individual human being who has been instrumental in creating wealth and technology to lift millions, if not billions, out of poverty. Prince T'Challa and his sister Shuri help to lead a society that is wealthy, prosperous – all while protecting the lives of individuals.

All of the Avengers are remarkable individuals who contribute enormous value to the world by means of their individual strength and freedom and ability. Their existence (and the existence of real remarkable individuals) is a signpost to the unexpected truth that there is no conflict between individual self-realization and collective well-being.

Everything the Avengers represent proves Thanos' philosophy wrong, but it's left to the viewer to see that. It's my hope that people come away from this movie seeing just how deeply flawed Thanos's worldview is.

Reality vindicates the quote at the beginning of this piece. To save one life really is to save the world entire, more often than you might think. Let's hope that the next Avengers movie reflects the victory of that idea.